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## Both Partners Are Responsible For The Relationship

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*By Kathy Bosch, Extension Specialist, Family Life Education*

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Both partners in a marriage are equally responsible for nurturing the relationship and "keeping the spark alive." Too often society has placed this responsibility on the woman when it should be equally shared. Women often have accepted the "caretaker" role partially because of their connectedness with children and family; however, both partners have a great stake in the well-being of the marriage and should care deeply about keeping the relationship viable and healthy. One person cannot strengthen the relationship alone. It takes two working together to strengthen the partner relationship.

Nurturing the relationship may take many forms. Gifts of flowers and chocolates, though romantic, are not nearly as important as the intangible gifts that accompany mature love. Partners nurture the relationship when they offer mutual respect to each other in decisions that affect the family and when they care about the other person's feelings.

Listening and sharing feelings are two other communication forms that help to strengthen relationships. When you want to understand what your partner said, reflect back your understanding to check if you interpreted correctly. While this process may seem complicated, it actually can be learned with some practice. Expressing feelings is the only way a partner can understand the other completely. You have probably heard the cliché, "I'm not a mind reader!" No one is. Self-disclosure occurs when a person is her real self in the presence of others. It means that one does not "walk on eggshells" but is honest and sincere. "Feeling talk" is the direct expression of feelings through words and body language. This kind of emotional directedness between people is rare and can be difficult. It is important to use "I" statements when expressing feelings or attempting to get someone to do something. With "I" messages, one acknowledges feelings, owns them and takes responsibility for them. (For example: "I am angry." "I am disappointed." "I am happy.")

Other qualities necessary for a successful marriage relationship include meeting crises successfully by attacking the problems and not each other. Every couple will experience some conflict, which is not necessarily negative. Through conflict you can share and learn things about each other.

The key to a successful partner relationship is often in how the conflict is handled. Learning the process

of negotiation will ease the strain when partners are in conflict or need a way of settling practical issues of some importance. Some differences may not be resolved but couples can find some agreement even in disagreement.

Negotiation will work only if the people involved feel that the maintenance and growth of the relationship is a priority. In other words, both must be fully committed to the relationship.

Being loyal and faithful, reinforcing and supporting each other, being truthful and open, sharing the same basic values, having a mutual friendship, satisfying each others' sexual needs, showing love and affection, and striving for similar goals are all qualities that help strengthen a partner relationship.

Partners must do something individually to nurture themselves, pursue interests and strengthen self-esteem. Individuals who fail to nurture themselves may find it difficult to give to others. It is critical that partners schedule time for themselves and their partner. Self-nurturance enhances one's ability to nurture a partner, which in turn enhances the relationship. The greater the commitment and genuine concern for a partner, the more likely the partner will respond in a similar manner. In most cases, individuals who have a happy partnership are giving people and sensitive to others' needs.

Strong marriages or partnerships do not just happen; they require effort. The individuals must work together to create and maintain a healthy, satisfying relationship. It is a responsibility that both partners share equally.

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